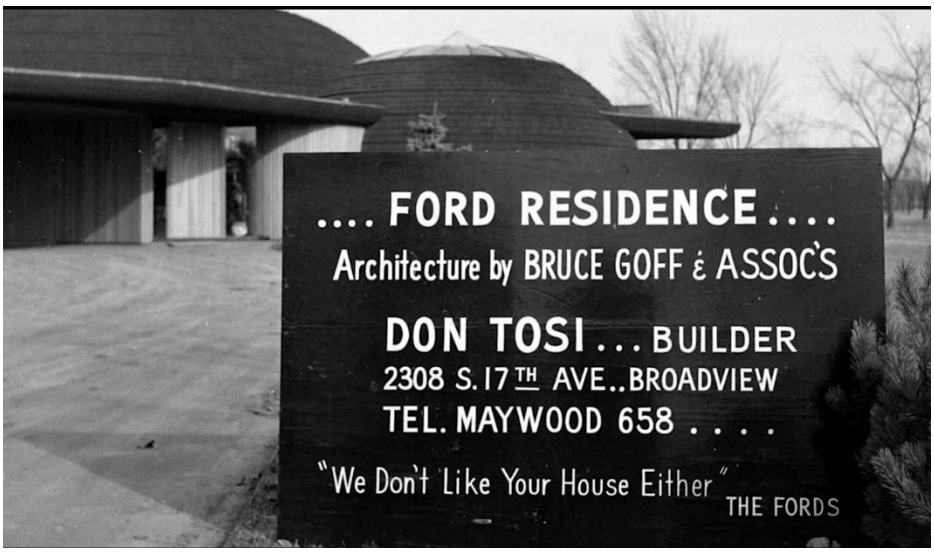
Bruce Goff (1904-1982)

On Saturday 24th May we will be visiting **The Ford House**, 404 S Edgelawn Avenue, Aurora, IL 60505, our last stop before departing from O'Hare, at the kind invitation of Professor Sidney K Robinson who has owned and lived in it since 1986. We will have a tour of this interesting (and certainly unusual) house.

Designed by architect Bruce Goff in 1949. Now a private residence, it is also commonly referred to as the "Round" or "Coal" house. Working on the theory that the circle is "an informal, gathering-around, friendly form," Goff designed the home with a centre circle 50 feet in diameter and two circular bedroom wings. It is constructed of anthracite coal, steel, glass, cedar, and hemp, and has remained relatively unchanged since its construction.

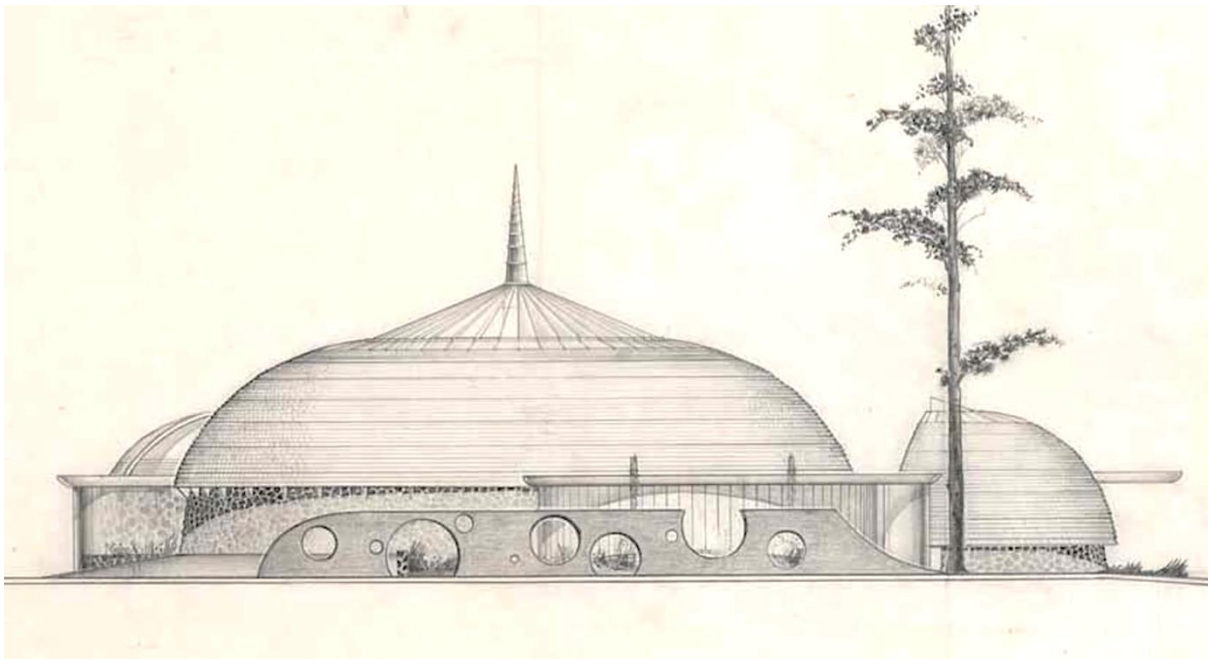


His clients got their defence in first

Bruce Goff was a self-educated and exceptionally creative architect. His organic designs often depended on creative free-association and borrowed materials. Ruth Van Sickle Ford was the original owner. She was a noted artist and was the director of the Chicago Academy of Fine Arts at the time the house was constructed.

There is a wonderful video: "Bruce Goff: Ford House."

And this covering more of his work:
https://www.google.com/search?q=Bruce+goff+biography&oq=Bruce+goff+biography&gs_lcrp=EgZjaHJvbWUyBggAEEUYOTIGCAEQRRhAMgcIAhAAGO8FMgoIAxAAGIAEGKIEMgcIBBAAGO8FMgoIBRAAGIAEGKIE0gEIOTIyOGowajSoAgCwAgE&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8#fpstate=ive&vhid=uX2Gk9HHm8d07M&vld=cid:b9528f8f,vid:Xa14n4IeXMk,st:0&vssid=l



I had not realised that the curved frames of the house were standard Quonset ribs (we call them Nissen huts after Major Peter Nissen, born in the USA, A British Officer in the Royal Engineers who came up with the original design). Goff was a “Seabee” (United States Naval Construction Battalions, better known as the Navy Seabees) and utilised the Quonset hut system for many buildings.

Personally having few claims to fame but very early in my career I solved the problem of expanding a Nissen hut for a client. They were a joinery firm using a 30 ft span hut, 120 ft long, who were going to buy another one and put it alongside their original one – they asked me to investigate how they could form openings and links between them to suit the flow of their production.

My idea was to prop up one half of the building, move the other half 40 ft away and constructing a lattice frame to connect them. The spine of this frame formed a beam and we were able to put the central posts at 24 ft centres (the ribs were at the normal 6 ft centres) thus forming a space 70 ft x 120 ft with only three freestanding columns. It formed a marvellous space with its curved side walls, much more pleasing than the normal portal framed sheds.

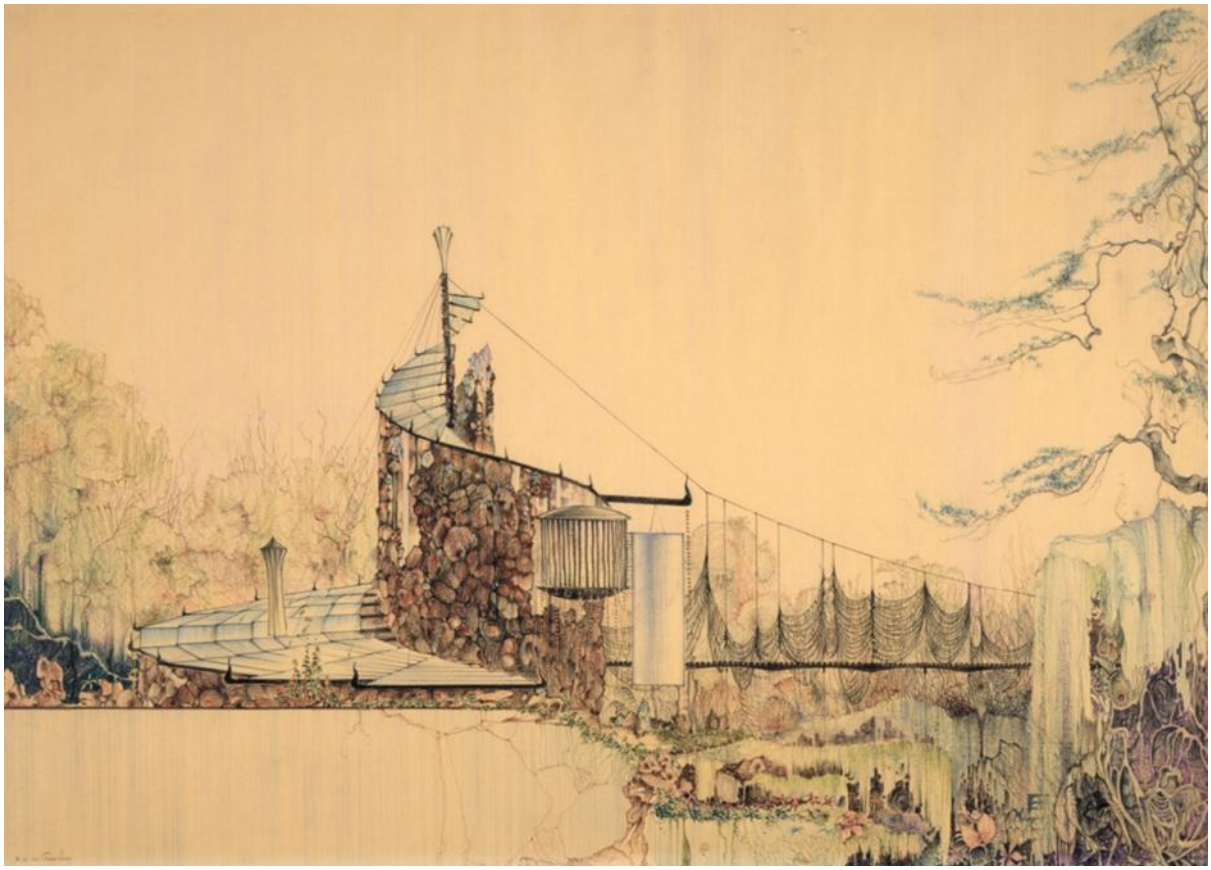
The project had a wonderful consequence (the life of a designer is controlled by serendipity) in that I was engaged to design the prototyping workshop (large enough for them to build a full size aeroplane body) for Ogle Design. This lead to a friendship with Tom Karen spanning over fifty years, then the UK’s leading product designer. I carried out various projects for him but the greatest pleasure was getting to see his designs for cars and commercial vehicles being built and playing with the toys that he designed. I had a Mk1 Scimitar but he is probably better known for the Bond Bug and the Raliegh Chopper Bike. His autobiography is “Toymaker: The autobiography of the man whose designs shaped our childhoods”.

He died at the ripe old age of 96 a couple of years ago. Before he died I was able to stage an exhibition of his life and work which ran for nearly 18 months. He and his family were able to visit it a number of times which gave me great joy.

One day at the exhibition he was talking to me about the prototyping workshop so I asked him how he found me. He told me that he had been on a radio broadcast with a young up and coming architect, Norman Foster, and had asked him to design it. He found the design to be totally unworkable and sacked him. He had seen my workshop from his house, asked who had designed it and engaged me for the Ogle project. I give talks on Tom's life and work, he told me to include that he has sacked Foster to employ me!

I have attached The Guardian article 'The Michelangelo of kitsch': the restoration of outsider architect Bruce Goff by Steve Rose (2020) and From The New York Times "The Man Who Made Wildly Imaginative, Gloriously Disobedient" (2018).Buildings

While still at school, I saw black and white photographs of the most wonderful building that I had ever seen. It turns out that it was Goff's Bavinger House. It must have had an effect on me as most of my early college projects had lots of exposed stonework. Unfortunately I never managed to find I client that wanted anything like this (and, if I had, probably wouldn't have been able to fin a planning authority who would have approved it!). A sadness of my research into Goff is that the Bavinger House has been demolished. We must be grateful to Professor Sidney K Robinson not only saving the Ford House but also maintaining it it such wonderful condition in his forty years living in it.



Gene and Nancy Bavinger House: South Elevation Showing Suspension Bridge over Ravine1950/51

There is a collection of his drawings in the Chicago Institute of Art but I don't know if any are actually on display

Bruce Goff in his office at Price Tower, Bartlesville, Oklahoma, about 1960s. Bruce A. Goff Archive, Ryerson and Burnham Archives.

GOFF, BRUCE ALONZO (1904–1982).

From The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture:
https://www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry?entry=GO001

Born June 8, 1904, in Alton, Kansas, to Corliss Arthur Goff, a jeweler, and Maude Furbeck Goff, a schoolteacher, Bruce Alonzo Goff lived with his family in several towns in Kansas, Colorado, and Oklahoma before moving to Tulsa in 1914. At age twelve Goff began his part-time work in the office of a local architecture firm, Rush, Endicott and Rush.

In those formative years Goff discovered Frank Lloyd Wright's work, a significant step in his intellectual development. He was drawn to Wright's philosophy of organic architecture, which emphasized nature and individuality, and he was intrigued by the prominent architect's buildings. Graduating from high school in Tulsa, Goff decided not to pursue academic training in architecture. He remained with Rush, Endicott until the Great Depression began.

During the 1920s he learned much about contemporary design. He studied the work of European expressionist architects while designing buildings for oil-rich Tulsans. His most significant achievement during these years was the 1926 Boston Avenue Methodist Episcopal Church, as a collaborative effort with Adah Robinson, his former art teacher and

client, who designed the decorative motifs. The building, with its 255-foot tower terminated by an ensemble of copper and glass fins, has been designated a National Historic Landmark as one of the most significant churches of the twentieth century. Further, Goff also began a lifelong interest in painting and music. Influenced by avant-garde European movements and artists such as Maxfield Parish, Goff developed a serious avocation, abstract painting. In addition, his abiding interest in classical music led him to explore the similarities between the elements of composition in music and architecture.

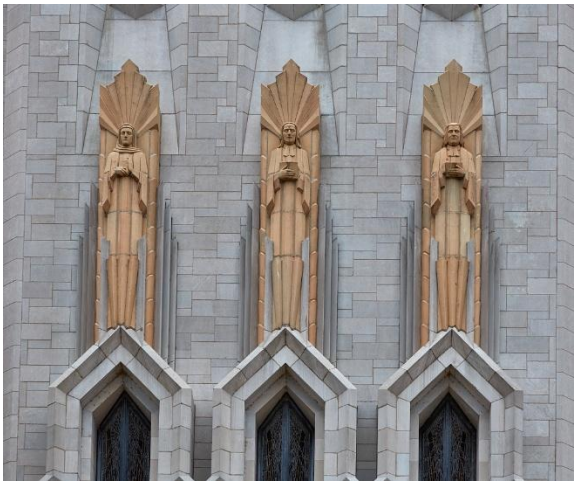
Goff practiced and taught in Chicago during the 1930s and served in a U.S. Navy construction battalion in Alaska during World War II. He practiced briefly in San Francisco before returning to Oklahoma in 1947 as a professor of architecture at the University of Oklahoma. Later that year he was appointed chair of the School of Architecture, a position he held until 1955.

From the postwar years until the end of his career, Goff's architectural expression became increasingly diverse. Central to his philosophy was the uniqueness of both client and building site as primary determinants of design. He would frequently ask clients about their favorite color and incorporate it into the design as a way of personalizing their environment. Yet there are common principles that establish a sense of continuity and inform us of his ideals. A prominent design principle evident in his work is the utilization of alternative typologies of geometry to define form. He would often derive a floor plan from a primary geometric form, such as a circle, triangle, or hexagon, with the interior volume defining a vertical axis. The interior space would then be magnified by an open plan with visual extensions into adjacent spaces. He also often designed "built-in" furnishings to be an integral part of the architecture. Natural light in Goff's buildings frequently comes through skylights or clerestories that offer views of clouds and sky. Facades are highly articulated and rich in pattern, texture and color. Many Goff houses have exaggerated eaves with a thin edge that evokes a feeling of lightness. He also used interior or exterior pools to reflect and embrace the natural world.

Goff executed many residential, commercial, and church designs in Oklahoma. Included are Shin'enKan near Bartlesville, Riverside Studio on Riverside Drive in Tulsa (listed in the National Register of Historic Places, NR 1000656), the Cox House in Boise City (now part of the Cimarron Heritage Center), the Celestine Barby Studio in Beaver, and the Hopewell Baptist Church in Edmond (NR 2001018). The Gene and Nancy Bavinger House, designed in 1950 for a rural site in Norman, Oklahoma, is regarded a significant example of his mature work. The plan is a logarithmic spiral with exterior walls of rubble stone inset with blue-green glass cullets. The spiral wall appears to emerge from the earth and wrap around a

central mast rising more than fifty feet in the air. The roof is a warped plane suspended from the mast by airplane struts. The space within is dynamic: the dimension between floor and ceiling expands, but the dimension between spiraling walls contracts. “Rooms” are circular platforms at different levels, accessible by stairways cling to the spiral’s interior wall. The lowest platform, located at the wide part of the spiral near the entry, is a conversation area raised slightly above the floor. Above are platforms that function as sleeping areas and an uppermost platform that is a glass-enclosed studio. Collectively, this ensemble of platforms establish a dominant rhythm that ascends upward.

In 1955 Goff relocated his practice from Norman to Bartlesville, Oklahoma. He later established his office in Kansas City for several years before moving to Tyler, Texas. During the last three decades of his career he continued to design highly original buildings from Florida to California and Minnesota to Texas, although there are more of his buildings in Oklahoma than in any other state. His last project, the Japanese Pavilion of the Los Angeles County Art Museum, has pleated, translucent walls like insect wings folded over a base of rubble stone. Built next to the La Brea Tar Pit, the design has animalistic qualities that resonate with pathos for the prehistoric creatures buried beneath the black, reflective surface. The museum building, with its suspended roof attached by cables to a projecting horn-like structure above, is a fitting tribute to the life and career of a true American genius. Bruce Goff practiced in Tyler until his death on August 4, 1982.



The Boston Avenue Methodist Episcopal Church in Tulsa, Oklahoma.
Constructed in 1924–29

‘The Michelangelo of kitsch’: the restoration of outsider architect Bruce Goff

https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2020/jan/10/michelangelo-kitsch-outsider-architect-bruce-goff

The Oklahoman was marginalised in his lifetime as much for his sexuality as his unusual designs, no two of which were the same

WC Gryder House (1962), Ocean Springs, Mississippi, by Bruce Goff. Photograph: Elena Dorfman/Redux/eyevine

Steve Rose The Guardian Fri 10 Jan 2020

Bruce Goff was the ultimate outsider architect. Despite being one of the most innovative, imaginative and downright interesting architects in history, with admirers including Frank Gehry, Mies van der Rohe, Philip Johnson and Frank Lloyd Wright, Goff, who died in 1982, remains a marginal figure. His exile was partly self-imposed, but there are signs that Goff was also pushed out – as a result of his sexuality as much as his unorthodox design philosophy.

We’ve come to associate US midcentury modernism with minimalism – everything clean and straight and simple. Goff’s buildings were the exact opposite: curvaceous or unconventionally geometric, busy, flamboyant, mysterious. Critics of the era could not get a handle on him. Charles Jencks described him as “the Michelangelo of kitsch”. Others described his work as organic, futuristic, or sci-fi. He was pop and postmodern before the terms existed. What’s more, not one of Goff’s works resembles another, making him even harder to classify.

A recurring motif is of diamond-shaped glass studs set into doors and columns. They are dime-store glass ashtrays

Consider one of his most famous works: the Bavinger House of 1955. Designed for an artist couple in Norman, Oklahoma, its roofline is a rising spiral hung by cables from a central mast, like a twist of lemon. Its spiralling wall resembles a rockery, embedded with boulders, living plants and chunks of reused waste glass. There are no rooms inside; instead, sitting and sleeping areas are saucer-shaped pods radiating from the core. Even with the advent of computer-aided design, few architects could conceive of such a structure. It resembles nothing else built before or since.

Goff would experiment with form, material, structure and ornament to almost absurd degrees. Materials he used in his buildings included aviation parts, goose feathers, oil rig equipment, orange artificial turf (on the roof), lumps of coal, and any kind of glass he could get his hands on. His 1948 Ledbetter House, also in Oklahoma, features a recurring motif of vertical lines of diamond-shaped glass studs set into doors and columns. In fact they are dime-store glass ashtrays.

The Bavinger House in Norman, Oklahoma.

If Goff was the Michelangelo of kitsch, then his Sistine chapel was a house known as Shin'En Kan in Bartlesville, Oklahoma. Designed over a period of 20 years for a wealthy patron named Joe Price, Shin'En Kan had golden roofs and a sunken "conversation pit" lined in deep-pile carpeting. For the windows, he created starburst patterns of sequins and glass tubes, originally intended for the artificial insemination of turkeys. A gallery to house Price's collection of Japanese screens had a hexagonal, glass-

bottomed pool in the middle. On the floor below was a hexagonal Japanese bathtub, so the pool acted as a skylight, and Price could lie in the bath and look up at his art.

“He was slightly humorous, but at heart he’s a serious architect,” says British architect John Sergeant, whom Goff stayed with when he came to Britain in 1978. “All the houses were very strictly geometrically controlled. I don’t think Goff was able to describe these things in intellectual terms; he just instinctively got them. He picked up the vibes, in music, in film. He was very aware of culture. I took him to a record shop in Cambridge and he came away with a suitcase full of far-out modern classical music – really noisy stuff.”

A decorative pool in the gallery of Shin’En Kan, Bartlesville, Oklahoma. Photograph: Horst P Horst/Conde Nast via Getty Images

Goff was an outsider from the start. Born in 1904, he grew up in Oklahoma – way off the cultural radar. Having demonstrated a flair for art as a child,

the 12-year-old Goff was taken by his father to a Tulsa architects' office, where he pleaded with them to give his boy a job. After quickly learning the basics of drafting, he began to produce his own designs. A colleague remarked that his ideas resembled the work of Frank Lloyd Wright, whom Goff had never heard of. So he wrote to Wright, who replied with words of encouragement, and advised him not to study at architecture school and to find his own path.

Goff's first major work was completed when he was just 22: the Boston Avenue Methodist Church in Tulsa. It looks like the work of a far older designer, with a soaring art deco spire, ornate detailing and a dramatic circular nave. Scholars are certain Goff was the main designer, though the church was a collaboration with his art teacher, Adah Robinson, who took sole credit. Goff's "flamboyant personality" did him no favours with the church, according to reports. As one newspaper put it: "Mr Goff's eccentricities were not well received."

It got worse when he began teaching at Oklahoma University in 1946. He was an inspirational teacher and, under his leadership, Oklahoma's architecture school developed an international reputation; but in 1955 he resigned under a cloud. He was accused of abusing a 14-year-old boy. Many maintain the incident was a setup, engineered by rivals uncomfortable with Goff's sexuality and jealous of his reputation. Goff was open about being gay and friends describe him as a kind and gentle soul who would never prey on underage boys.

The interior of the Bavinger House. Photograph: AY Owen/The LIFE Images Collection via Getty Images

He retreated to the wilderness, although he was kept busy by a steady stream of patrons. Shin'En Kan was destroyed in a fire in 1996, which many suspect was arson. Perhaps those walls of coal weren't such a good idea, after all. The Bavinger House, too, was destroyed. After the death of its owners, it stood empty and fell into disrepair. It was demolished, supposedly after being damaged by a storm in 2011.

Many more Goff properties have been lost through straightforward neglect or disregard for his reputation – although some, including the Ledbetter House, are now on the National Register of Historic Places. Goff's reputation is being rehabilitated. The Oklahoma film-maker Britni Harris recently completed a new documentary, titled *Goff*, which premiered at the Architecture & Design Film Festival in New York last October. It begins with a tour of Goff's 1927 Tulsa club, once a grand meeting place for the great and good, but in the film a graffiti-strewn, burnt-out hulk. After extensive restoration, the Tulsa Club was saved. It opened as a hotel in April 2019.

Goff didn't come out of nowhere – he cited influences including Gaudí, Wright, Native American art and music, especially Debussy. His architecture was truly organic in that it arose out of its inhabitants' needs, their lifestyles, their interests, their tastes, to the extent, as Sergeant puts it, that they were almost "architectural portraits". Where most postwar Americans lived in identical, mass-produced boxes, Goff's clients received something that reflected their individuality as much as his. And where many architects develop a signature style, Goff saw each project as a chance to think architecture anew. And if some of Goff's solutions were too new for their time, his work still stands as a signpost to just how radical architecture could be.

And this from the New York Times in 2018

The Man Who Made Wildly Imaginative, Gloriously Disobedient Buildings

Bruce Goff's midcentury houses across the Midwest are symbols of both a heartland-born eccentricity and a distinct Modernism. So why has he been forgotten?
https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/10/t-magazine/bruce-goff-architecture-midwest.html

The vivid lavender 1962 Gryder House in Ocean Springs, Miss., is one of roughly 150 remarkable structures realized by the largely forgotten architect Bruce Goff. Still occupied by the son of the couple who built it, the house is fronted by a reflecting pool and has conical balconies off each bedroom.Credit...Elena Dorfman

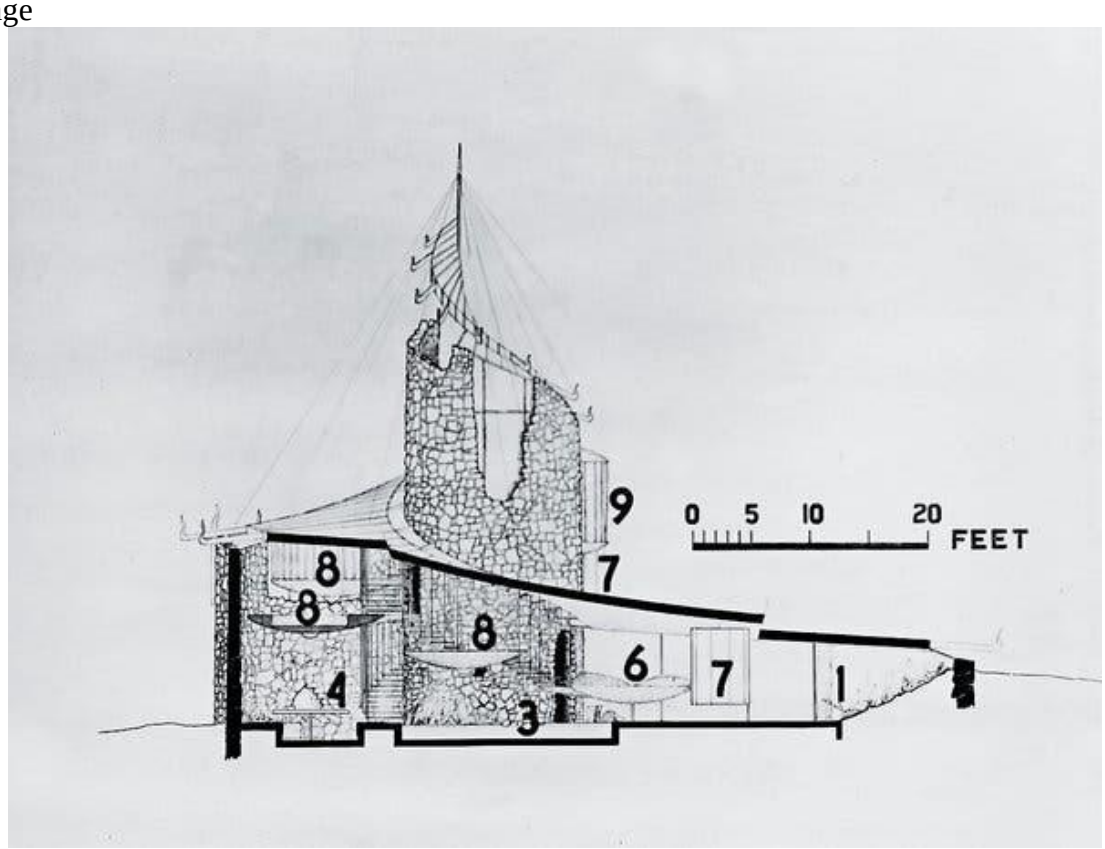
By Amanda Fortini Sept. 10, 2018

AURORA, ILL., 45 miles west of Chicago, lies deep in suburbia: It's the fictional setting of "Wayne's World" and the real-life setting of my adolescent weekends at the mall. Behind a commercial strip lined with big-box stores, among the split-levels and center-hall colonials, in the kind of neighborhood where kids run through sprinklers on summer weekends, crouches a massive mushroom-cap dome, 48 feet in diameter. Formed by bright red Quonset hut ribs and flanked by two smaller partial domes, the structure — whose windowless front is done in inky coal masonry studded with rough-hewn chunks of aquamarine glass — looks like a spaceship that's pulled up its jet bridge. From the back, where its red exoskeleton is exposed, it resembles a birdcage. This is the Ford House, designed in 1947 by Bruce Goff, a prolific and startlingly original midcentury architect who remains, outside of design circles, largely unknown.

When one thinks of the architecture of the Midwest, one thinks, of course, of the elegantly autocratic Frank Lloyd Wright and his Prairie School houses: With their tiers of low-pitched roofs, jutting eaves and bands of leaded-glass windows, these homes came to define organic Modernism and redefine the relationship between environment and habitation. One thinks, too, of Wright's mentor, Louis Sullivan, who is regarded as the father of Modern architecture for first uttering the phrase "form ever follows function" but who is probably better known for the eight jewel-box banks he built in Midwestern towns.

Yet now, in our era of elegantly restrained and frequently dour minimalism, when architecture is almost always the province of the rich, it may be that Goff, with his aesthetic idiosyncrasies and affinity for middle-class Midwestern clients (schoolteachers, farmers, salesmen, small-town newspaper publishers), still has lessons to teach us, 36 years after his death. His daring, elaborately imagined homes — he loved unusual shapes and made ample use of found materials — are often dismissed by cultural mandarins as overly futuristic and corny, but they possess a warmth, an earthiness and a wild ingenuity that serve as an antidote to the soberly luxurious, the pared down and the austere.

Image



A Goff sketch of the Norman, Okla., Bavinger House, designed in 1950.Credit...Bruce Goff Archive, Ryerson and Burnham Archives, the Art Institute of Chicago

The back of the Ford House in Aurora, Ill., reveals Quonset hut ribs.Credit...Bruce Goff Archive, Ryerson and Burnham Archives, the Art Institute of Chicago

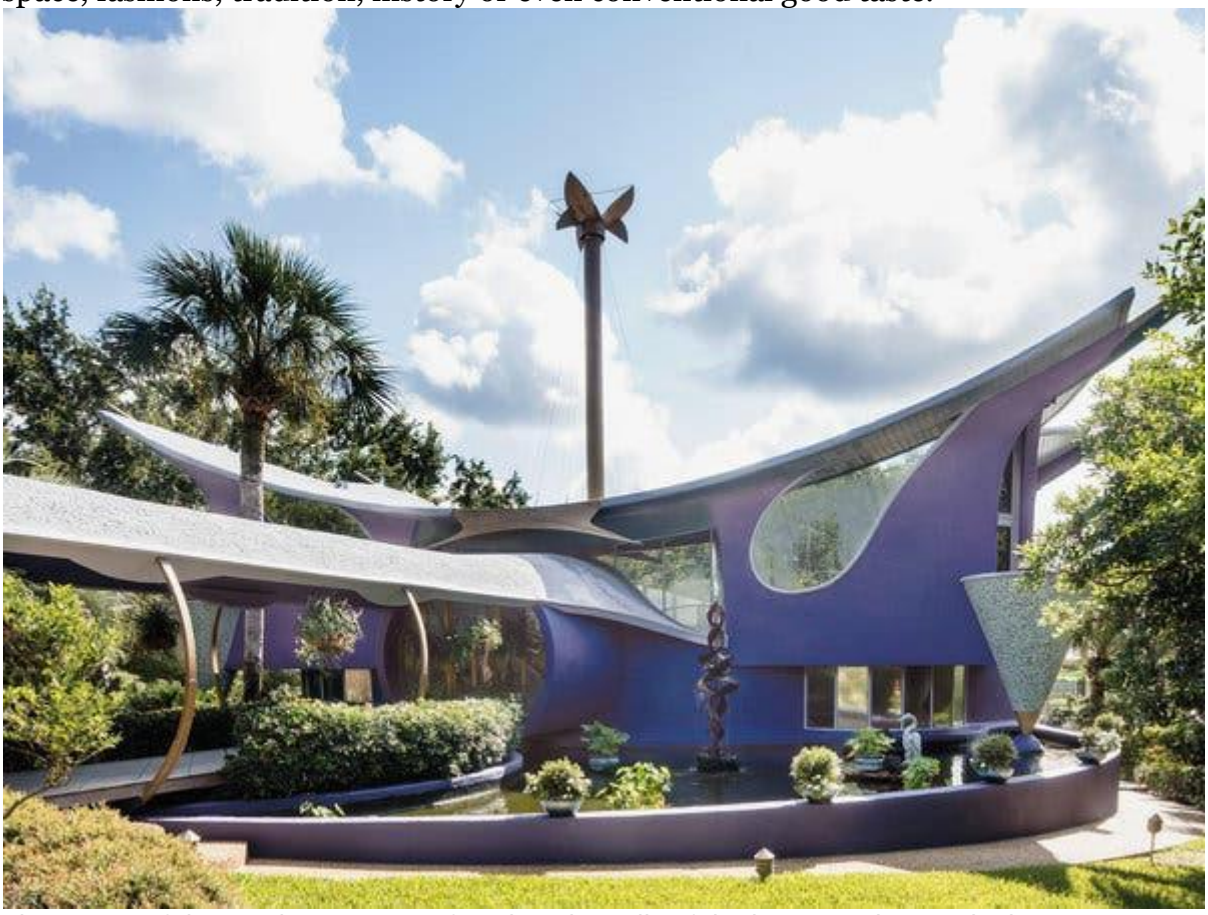
Among Goff's unconventional masterworks was the Bavinger House, designed in 1950 for artist friends in Norman, Okla. This 96-foot-long logarithmic sandstone spiral coiled around a steel pole from which the architect suspended the roof, the stairs and what he called "five living areas in the shape of carpeted bowls." The ground floor featured an "indoor water garden," as Goff put it, through which the Bavingers waded via steppingstones, like characters in a nursery rhyme, to reach the dining area. Here, they sat on carpet-covered foam pads arranged around a revolving mirrored dining table that reflected the moods of the sky. (I like to imagine that marijuana was sometimes involved.)

Then there's the radically geometric Nicol House, built in Kansas City, Mo., in 1967. An octagonal conversation pit surrounded by octagonal bedrooms — each painted its own deep hue, like blueberry or fuchsia — it also has triangular windows and a hexagonal pool in the yard. Crown-shaped and covered in pale-green hexagonal shingles, the house today resembles a frosted cake. Bill Gryder, who grew up in Ocean Springs, Miss., where he still owns a Goff house — an arresting violet-hued swoop that Dalí could have painted — told me that his flashy, headstrong mother (a housewife married to the owner of a chain of shoe stores) read about Goff's work in a magazine at the beauty parlor and called to ask him to design her a house. "Her favorite color," Gryder tells me, "was glitz." Goff's homes were not for the minimalist.

His audaciousness may seem surprising given that he built his most important projects in Illinois, Oklahoma, Kansas, Minnesota and Mississippi — in the spiritual Midwest, if not the Midwest proper. Goff designed about 500 structures, roughly a third of which were realized and an unknown number of which survive. Many were private homes constructed during his prolific postwar period, from 1947 to 1955, when he was the chair of the University of Oklahoma's School of Architecture. A beloved teacher with no interest in cultivating acolytes, the gentle, unassuming Goff taught students to find and shepherd their own creative instincts. But he was also a

quiet eccentric who often wore disco-print shirts and bolo ties and decorated his office with oversize silver snowflakes, sheets of translucent plastic and his own abstract paintings. At night, he would gather students in a lecture hall, turn off the lights and play classical records, encouraging them to meditate on their ideas in the dark.

For anyone who has lived in the Midwest, among the hushed suburban conformity and tidy green lawns, it's not remotely shocking that an untamable imagination like Goff's could arise from — and was perhaps even animated by — the area's vast, monotonous landscapes and often conservative attitudes. This is, after all, the region that produced Mark Twain, Walt Disney, Richard Pryor, F. Scott Fitzgerald and the Surrealist painter Dorothea Tanning. Goff could arguably *only* have worked far from the cultural-elite coasts, in a place where people are not bound by the constraints of space, fashions, tradition, history or even conventional good taste.



The swoop of the Gryder House roof evokes the sails of the boats on the nearby bayou. Credit...Elena Dorfman

IT IS DIFFICULT TO CONSIDER Goff apart from the specter of Wright, with whom he had a complicated friendship. The two men first made contact when the teenage Goff — a prodigy born in small-town Kansas, whose watch-repairman father apprenticed him to the top architecture firm in Tulsa, Okla., at the age of 12 — wrote to the famous older man, who was 37 years his senior, asking whether he should get an architecture degree. Wright cautioned against it, saying that if he went to school, he might "lose Bruce Goff." Goff listened. By age 15, his first house was under construction. By 21, he'd designed the Boston Avenue Methodist Church in downtown Tulsa, a soaring Art Deco-Gothic masterpiece.

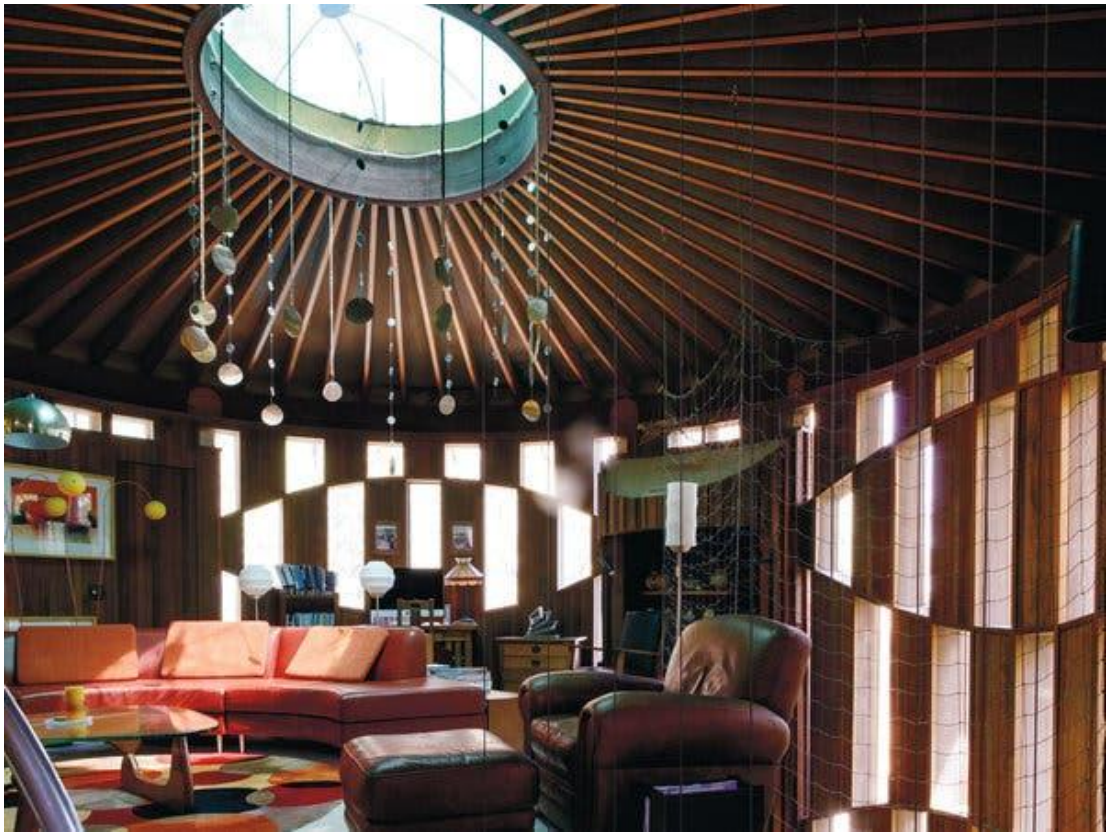
Wright came to view Goff as one of the few truly creative American architects (the establishment was not always so kind), but their relationship was, at least for Goff, always uneasy. The men shared a fascination with geometric invention and the belief that a building should respond to the surrounding natural world. And it was Goff

who, in 1952, suggested that the industrialist Harold C. Price hire Wright to build his Bartlesville, Okla., headquarters — Wright's only high-rise (now an arts center and luxury hotel). But for the most part, Goff held the famous architect at a distance, declining to join the Taliesin Fellowship, the apprenticeship program Wright established on his Wisconsin estate. Goff's early homes in Chicago gesture toward Wright's, but by 1940, keenly aware that the architect judged his followers harshly and wary of being compared to him, the younger man began to move in his own direction. "The Wright influence has finally been assimilated," Goff wrote, "and my own voice, small as it was, was speaking."

Goff created environments that were unique to each client. Still, his structures shared certain leitmotifs. Most significantly, he favored dramatic geometries: Life magazine noted that he scorned "boxes with little holes" and, in 1948, profiled his Ledbetter House in Norman — a split-level with irregular stone walls and what look like red flying saucers floating over the carport and terrace. His homes were instead spherical, triangular, octagonal, curvilinear, cylindrical. His open floor plans were also unorthodox, as were the colors he used. The 1965 Dace House in Beaver, Okla., a series of silo-like cylinders, was done in rust red, like a barn on the prairie. The 1971 Harder House in Mountain Lake, Minn. — a low-slung, rustic structure that might have emerged from a German fairy tale — had a roof made of carpet in the unmistakable orange of the era.

With his use of vernacular and castoff materials, including salvaged oil-field pipe and jute rope, Goff simultaneously anticipated the age of sustainable architecture and enshrined the flotsam of American industry and mass-product design, elevating everyday items to decorative art. He began incorporating found objects while in a Navy construction battalion during World War II, and he continued this practice even in the absence of wartime shortages. Sequins, old aircraft struts, tin cookie cutters and strips of clear plastic "rain" all appeared in his work. Walls of anthracite coal embedded with bluish-green cullet (waste glass culled from the kiln during glassmaking) became a trademark, as did doors decorated with dime-store ashtrays. The Hopewell Baptist Church in Edmond, Okla., featured a 35-foot chandelier made of metal cake pans and plastic coasters. Aficionados of such ornamental flourishes affectionately call them "Goffitecture." In another person's hands, they would have been camp, but Goff did not design with a winking, ironic eye.

His use of uncommon materials reached its apotheosis at Shin'enKan, the 1958 bachelor pad he built for his patron Joe Price — the wealthy son of Harold and one of the world's foremost collectors of Edo-period Japanese art — and continued to expand upon for the next 18 years. The critic Ada Louise Huxtable called the mansion "a Playboy dream, if Playboy were an architect": It had a hexagonal white shag-upholstered conversation pit in a capacious main room that seated 75, exterior walls covered in gold-anodized aluminum, cabinets of African zebra wood and a ceiling appliquéd with white goose feathers



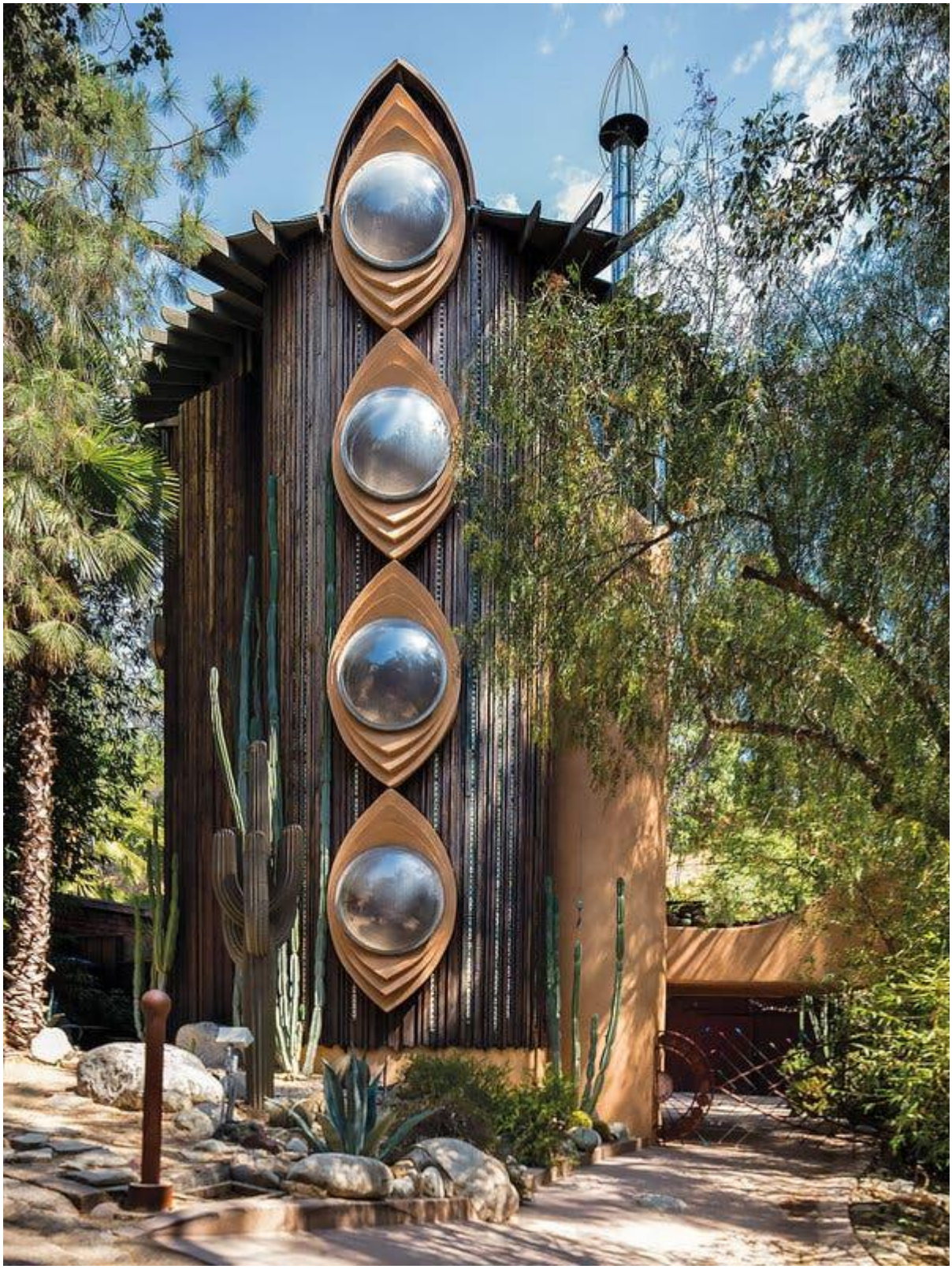
Goff designed the Struckus House in Woodland Hills, Calif., in 1979. He died shortly after construction began in 1982. The living room, on the top floor, has a circular skylight.Credit...Elena Dorfman

TODAY, MANY OF GOFF'S HOUSES are crumbling, with no cult of restoration-minded architectural buffs working to save them. Two of his greatest creations have been destroyed entirely: Shin'enKan, which Joe Price donated to the University of Oklahoma in 1985, burned down in a 1996 arson; a few years ago, after more than a decade of neglect, the Bavinger House was razed by the son of its original owners.

There are several reasons Goff's legacy has been more or less forgotten: his unfashionable taste for embellishment with what some would call junk; his indifference to branding and refusal to develop a signature style; and his being a gay man in the mid-20th century in less-than-progressive Oklahoma. (In 1955, he was forced to resign from the university after being arrested for "contributing to the delinquency of a minor.") It also doesn't help that one of his few public buildings, the magnificent Pavilion for Japanese Art at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, which houses much of Joe Price's collection, came at the end of his career (and was finished posthumously by the architect Bart Prince).

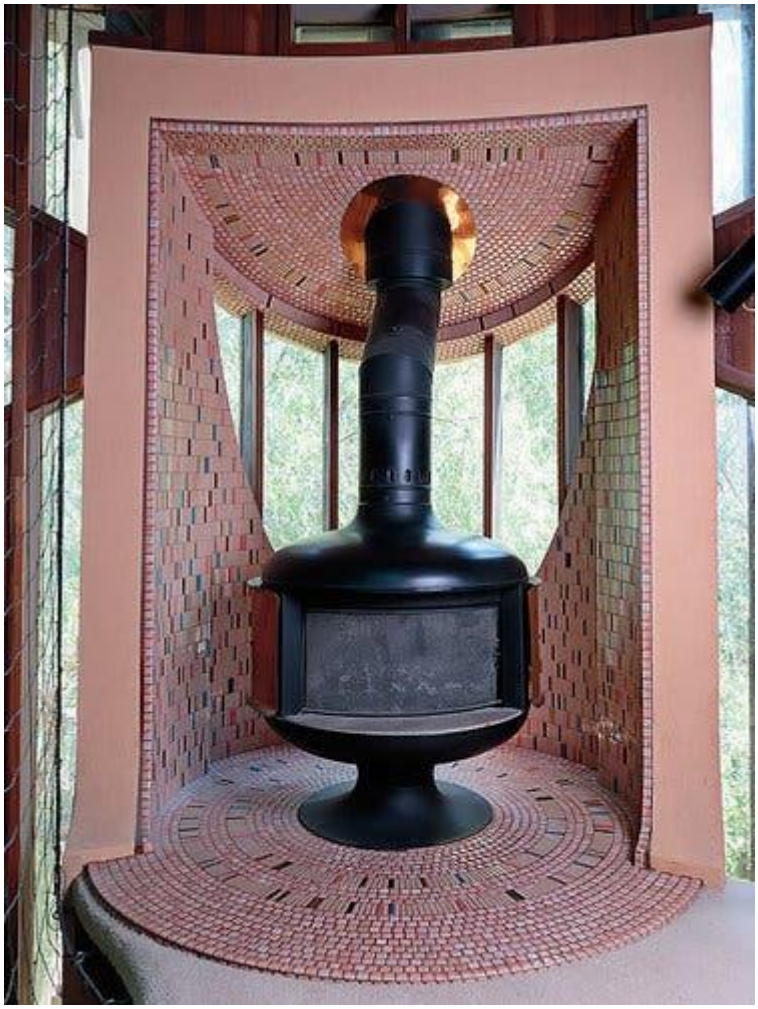
But his obscurity also stems in part from the fact that he worked far from the corridors of cool. His homes celebrated his clients' modest roots without condescension (they were his roots, too) or heartland clichés. His work shows us what Midwesterners have always known, and what people have recently begun to say quite vociferously: that there has long been a strain of creative radicalism in places discounted as having none.

Image



With a four-story main cylinder and five smaller interlocking cylinders, the Struckus House resembles a totem pole.Credit...Elena Dorfman

Image



The fireplace is in a pink-tiled alcove.Credit...Elena Dorfman

After his university departure, Goff worked for another 27 years, right up until his death in 1982 — he lived for a time in Wright's Bartlesville high-rise, then moved to Kansas City and later to Tyler, Tex. — but never quite regained the momentum of his early career. His gravesite on the North Side of Chicago is marked by a triangular plaque cast in bronze that reads "Bruce Goff Architect" in the Art Deco font he used to sign his sketches. It's adorned with a hunk of turquoise cullet salvaged from the burned remains of Shin'enKan.

But a mere hour to the west sits the Ford House, a spectacular emblem of his relevance. Inside, a domed ceiling of pale cypress in a meticulous chevron pattern arcs to meet midnight-black coal walls. In the soft winter light, the aquamarine glass gleams like unmined gemstones. Standing there, you realize that Goff's designs possess a beauty and rigor that gets obscured by their playfulness; he's like Twain, another quintessentially American genius, with a seriousness lurking just beneath his puckish surface.

Goff's work, the scholar David G. De Long has written, "broadened levels of acceptance of the original and the untried." That was no small feat in the Midwest at midcentury, and it's not a minor one now. His oeuvre stands as a reminder that weirdness in unexpected precincts can be electrifying and edifying. Of course, in its rebuke to conformity, it can also be terrifying. "If you're frightened of difference," Sidney Robinson, the architect and historian who bought the Ford House in 1986, tells me, "this is a very unsettling place."